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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some of the literature related to evaluator certification programs and expresses a concern over the unilateral implementation of such a program by an evaluation organization like the American Evaluation Association. Such a move could lower the economic incentives that evaluators from developing countries would have to join their own regional or national evaluation organizations. This could delegitimize all of the other regional and national evaluations around the world and ultimately fragment the profession. The solution offered is for regional and national evaluation organizations to work together through the future International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation to implement a certification or credentialing program collectively. (Author/SLD)

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A Conditional Case for Certification of Evalu ators

By

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Abstract

In this article, the author reviews some of the literature around certification programs. He then expresses a concern over the unilateral implementation of such a program by an evaluation organization like AEA. Such a move could lower the economic incentives that evaluators from developing countries would have to join their own regional or national evaluation organizations. This could delegitimize all of the other regional and national evaluations around the world and ultimately fragment the profession. The solution that is offered is for regional and national evaluation organizations to work together through the future International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) to collectively implement a certification or credentialing program.

A Conditional Case for Certification/ Licensure

Like most evaluators, I have listened to the pros and cons of the certification debate with great interest. Arnold Love provided an early (1994) assessment of the issues. According to him, the essence of certification involves:

> . . . the assessment by professional peers of the applicant's competence against standards accepted within the profession. The successful applicant then receives a written certificate from a recognized body, usually a professional association. (pg. 29)

Love identified two major approaches to certification: the professional development approach and the licensing approach. The former emphasizes that the central purpose of certification is to provide assurance of an individual's knowledge, competencies, and application of the profession's standards of practice and code of ethics. The latter employs a regulatory approach by granting licenses to practice. Sanctions are enforced for those who practice without the required license.

1997 Board Report

More recently, the Forum section of a volume of AJE (Fall, 1999) was devoted to the topic. James Altschuld (1999) presented highlights from a 1997 report on certification that was submitted to the Board of Directors of the American Evaluation Association. According to him, the report stated that most professions have some kind of formal, usually accredited, training. Often apprenticeship-like experiences such as practicums or internships are required. At the conclusion of the training, a test or examination is usually administered. Certification has costs (a minimum figure of

US$100 was quoted) associated with it. These would not be one-time fees because certification would need to be renewed periodically. Responsibility for certification often resides in a professional society or association. Putting all of the pieces of a certification scheme in place would be a time consuming process. It was anticipated that it could take seven years or longer.

Altschuld went on to outline possible next steps for AEA regarding certification. These include:

1. Maintain the status quo.
2. Immediately proceed to develop an examination to be used for certification purposes.
3. Develop a plan for accreditation only, which would serve as a half-way step between maintaining the status quo and certification.
4. Develop a plan that includes a reasonable timetable for certification that would link certification with accreditation.
5. Consider adopting a system of "credentialing" similar to the one developed and used in Canada.
6. Consider forming partnerships to defray the costs of both accreditation and certification.
7. Consider sponsoring a conference to examine the issue of what are the unique value-added dimensions of the field of evaluation and training in evaluation, especially as they would pertain to certifying evaluators.

8. Consider using an issue of the American Journal of Evaluation for a pro/con discussion of the issues surrounding accreditation and certification or credentialing.

Credentialing a Good Start

Altschuld (2001) believes adopting a credentialing system would be a good way for AEA to start the certification process. Credentialing implies that a person has studied a field and completed specified courses and activities in that field. In order to credential evaluators, a professional association would specify prerequisites, such as training in methods, academic degrees, work experience, and other specialized experiences, that an individual must have (Altschuld, 1999). Altschuld (1999) cites Canada as a successful model of credentialing.

> The Canadian system requires that evaluators successfully participate in four daylong workshops, with the content having been chosen on the basis of commonly accepted evaluation activities and principles . . . . An established evaluator would take part in the training as a form of review of or reinforcement for concepts and ideas with which they should be very familiar. For less established evaluators the four workshops would ensure, especially to outside audiences, that credentialed evaluators had been exposed to and trained at a basic level in key evaluation areas. While the Canadian system had other, more extensive training options, its major component consisted of the four workshops. (p. 508)

Altschuld (1999) envisions this credentialing system as being entirely voluntary just as the Canadian system is voluntary (Porteous, 2001). He concedes the possibility

that numerous individuals will simply continue to call themselves evaluators without the benefit of credentials. However, he hopes that a "press" would gradually emerge for those who consider themselves to be professional evaluators to pursue credentialization (Altschuld, 1999). Altschuld's hope is my fear. In the following section, I assert that this "press" could have negative implications for regional and national evaluation organizations around the world.

XCeval Discussion

The entire certification debate was reframed for me by a recent discussion that took place on XC-eval, a listserv for persons with interest in international and cross-cultural evaluation. On September 10, Paul Clements, Professor of International Development at Western Michigan University, posted a message dealing with reform of the World Bank. His fascinating analysis (Clements, 2001) is still available in the XCeval archives. Among the recommendations that Clements (2001) made was to improve the Bank's evaluation function. He stated:

> A possible direction for reform would be the development of an evaluation association that defines itself by a set of standards. It would have to have an exam. It would focus on impact evaluations, and its members could only apply the association's stamp to evaluations that are comprehensive in scope and that have access to all relevant records and persons. The idea is that development projects should be judged by consistent, results-oriented standards, and evaluators should make their best professional estimates of the quantity and quality of the project's likely impacts. This would provide a much stronger foundation for ongoing country strategy

and for the design of subsequent projects, and it would build in an incentive for project managers and supervisors to focus on impacts. Therefore if I, a certified/licensed evaluator, sign my name to an evaluation, I am vouching that the evaluation adheres to the association's standards, at pain of the loss of my certification/license.

While I agreed with Clement's analysis, I disagreed with his recommendations (Russon, 2001). I argued that this could have a detrimental impact upon the evaluation profession. To understand my rationale, you must know that, over the past six years or so, the number of regional and national evaluation organizations has increased exponentially. Today, by my count, there are more than 40 evaluation organizations around the world (see the following URL: http://home.wmis.net/~russon/ioce/eorg.htm).

If a new evaluation organization, such The World Bank/UNDP supported IDEAS or an existing evaluation organization, such as AEA, unilaterally put a certification scheme into place, I think that it could delegitimize many of the regional and national evaluations around the world. How? If you were a large development agency and you had to choose between hiring an evaluator who was CERTIFIED by a western evaluation organization and one who came from a developing country without such a certification, which would you choose?

This could result in a "press" to join IDEAS or AEA in order to accrue the real or perceived economic benefits of certification. Evaluators from developing countries would have little or no incentive to join their own regional or national evaluation organizations. The effect could be devastating for new regional and national evaluation organizations that are springing up in the developing world. I can envision a scenario in

which these organizations are depopulated as quickly as they are formed. If they survived at all, they would be weak and underresourced.

Regional and national evaluation organizations that lacked a certification scheme could come to be seen as inferior. Should the scenario unfold as outlined above, I believe that a likely outcome would be a certification race. As soon as one organization implements a certification scheme, the others will scramble to implement schemes of their own. There could eventually be separate certification schemes for the African Evaluation Association, American Evaluation Association, Australasian Evaluation Society, Canadian Evaluation Society, European Evaluation Society, and on down the list. This could fragment the evaluation world. In the worst case, the day may come when, to work in a certain geographical location, it may be *de facto* if not *de jure* necessary to hold certification from the regional or national evaluation organization with jurisdiction in the area.

Possible Solution

The question in my mind is how to get the benefits of certification without fragmenting the profession. One possible solution involves the future International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE). The IOCE will be a loose coalition of regional and national evaluation organizations dedicated to building leadership and capacity in developing countries, fostering the cross-fertilization of evaluation theory and practice around the world, and assisting the evaluation profession to take a more global approach to contributing to the identification and solution of world problems. Information about the IOCE is available at the following web site:

http://home.wmis.net/~russon/ioce/

I would submit that, rather than unilaterally implement a certification scheme, regional and national evaluation organizations around the world should work together, through the IOCE, to collectively implement a certification or credentialing program. What would such a program look like? The IOCE could facilitate discussion by regional and national evaluation organizations about the courses and field experiences necessary for credentialing. Then the IOCE could partner with public and/or private organizations to provide courses in order to help evaluators from developing countries obtain the training necessary for credentialing. The World Bank's International Programme for Development of Evaluation Training (IPDET) might be a prototype for such training. During the IOCE panel at the 2000 AEA conference, Linda Morra (2000) described IPDET in the following way:

> we also have launched . . . a major evaluation treaty effort called IPDET which is the International Programme for Development Evaluation Training. What we're doing is linking with Carleton University in Ottawa and on June 24-July 20, we are offering about 160 hours of intensive training in development evaluation. There will be two weeks of core training in development evaluation with focus on basic evaluation training jointly with focus on the issues that are critical to development evaluators, but which may not be so critical to others who are not in the field of development. Following those 80 hours of core instruction will be another 80 hours of electives modeled on the idea of the Evaluators' Institute that Midge Smith has done so well, but again centered on development evaluation. The idea is that all the training sections would use case studies

that are development case studies and be very applied with lots of exercises and opportunities to apply what has been learned.

While challenging, in my opinion, such a move would have a number of benefits. It would increase the quality of evaluation throughout the whole world without the divisive effects of competition. If the evaluation profession approached funders with a unified voice, the probability of obtaining funding to support the program would be greater than if each organization tried to obtain funding separately.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the time has passed when regional and national evaluation organizations can implement major programs without considering the effect upon their counterparts in other parts of the world. Certification is the type of issue that could provide short-term benefit for an early adopter, but ultimately be bad for the entire profession. I believe that, if we are to undertake certification or credentialing in any form, the best way to go about doing it is in a unified manner, leaving no regional or national groups behind.

Notes

1. This article represents the views of the author and not necessarily those of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation or the presidents of regional and national evaluation organizations helping to create the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation.
2. The author wishes to thank James Altschuld, Teresa Behrens, Paul Clements, Mel Mark, Anne C. Petersen, and Nancy Porteous for their valuable feedback on an early draft of this manuscript.

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